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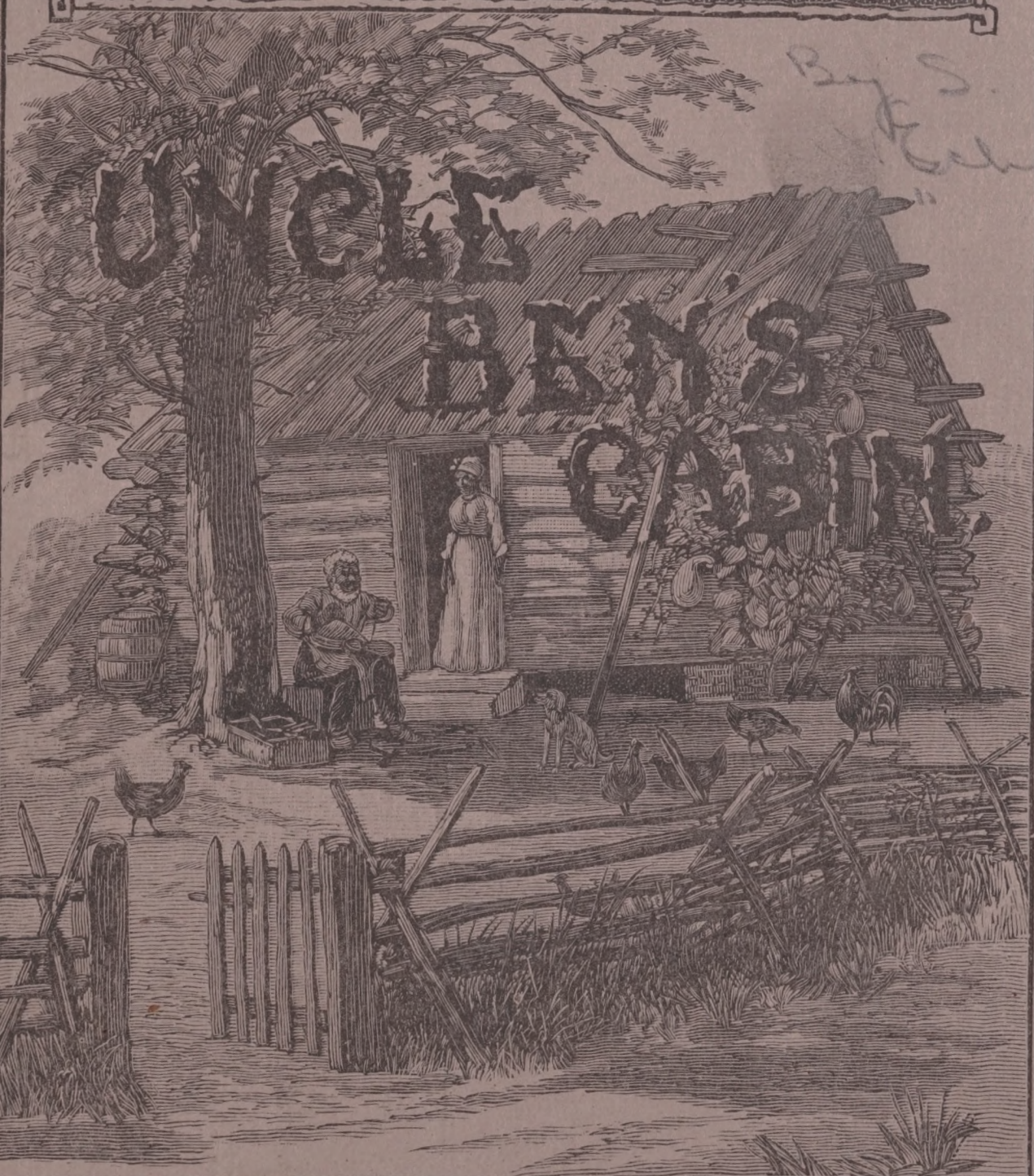

UNCLE BEN'S CABIN

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UNCLE BEN'S CABIN.

BY ROB ROY.

[NOTE BY THE AUTHOR.—While the guest of an Alabama planter I met most of the characters who appear in my story. One winter evening in company with the "Swanson" household, I called on Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy, and had from their lips much that enters into the colloquy. A remembrance of some of the pranks accredited to the boys in the first chapter, was responsible for another emotion than merriment when, a short time since, a letter informed me that a dusky hand which had been fatherly in its kindness to me in the by gone time had "laid down the shovel and the hoe." Of all the memories of my boyhood, there are few so tender as those of old colored friends, whose devotion was only second to that of mother and father. It is to the memory of these that I inscribe the story.]

CHAPTER I.

OLD FOLKS AT HOME.

"Nobody knows de trubbul I see,
Nobody knows but de Lord an' me."

THE singer was seated on a cobbler's bench just without the door of a rickety log cabin at the roadside. A crop of kinky, gray hair covered the head and lower face of the old black man. A tanglework of vines, fruited with crooked-neck gourds, thatched the front of the one-room house. An oak in full foliage, though browned by Septem-

ber suns, shaded the dusky artisan, who was sturdily pegging a half sole on to a leviathan brogan, the while twanging in strong nasal accents the refrain:

"Nobody knows de trubbul I see,
Nobody knows but de Lord an' me."

He looked up in wording the second line, to find three riders clearing the copse of wood which bounded the eastern vision from his cabin, at a distance of two or three rods. He discovered, too, that the eyes of the horsemen were bent on him, that they drew rein before his door and even addressed him:

"Hallo! Uncle; will we reach Judge Swanson's by this road?" asked one of our party.

"Yes, sah! massa; yon's de place—de big white house whar de roads crosses."

"Is the Judge at home?"

"Yes, sah! him an' Squire Cody, as possesses de taxes ov' de county, druv by here from de Lockhart place lessen a hour ago," answered the cobbler, adjusting his spectacles, from which a glass was missing, for a better observation of the travelers.

"The Lockhart place!" uttered our spokesman in a soliloquizing way. "Let me think; did not John, Will and George Lockhart once live here?"

"Dey did dat! Lor', boss, does you know dem boys?"

"We have seen them, and very bad boys they were too."

"Not bad, boss," exclaimed the old man, "not bad—j'es mischievous wuz all; w'y I raised 'em—so I did."

"Is that so? Well, now it occurs to me I have heard them mention an old colored friend; tut, tut, what was his name!"

"Mout it a been Uncle Ben?" questioned the now interested old man.

"Sure enough! it was Uncle Ben!"

"Hi! Hi! dis is dat bery ole niggah his self, massa?" cackled the old fellow, as tossing his work aside he rose to his feet.

"Can this be true? and so you are the Uncle Ben we've heard those boys tell of. Well, they were a wild set; I saw one of them in a jail not long since," said our spokesman.

The old man dropped upon his bench again with a woe-begone face.

"Boss, you don' tell me one of my young massas wuz in a jail house!" he ejaculated; "which un em wuz it?"

"It was George—but this man should have told you he was only there to see a prisoner and not made to go," I blurted out upon observing the old man's distress.

"Bress de Lord," he exclaimed fervently, and after a sigh of relief, added, "I knows my George neber stole nuffin nor kilt nobody."

"But did not the boys torment you wickedly when they were growing up?" our spokesman resumed. "How about the time George made you jump over a bench in church?"

This question threw Uncle Ben into a mirthful fit in which he rolled his head from side to side, slapped both hands upon his patched knees and laughed immoderately.

"Did dat boy tell 'bout dem doin's? Well, he was owdashus dat day, shore enough, and when ole missus heerd about it (but I didn't told'er) she jest lathered 'im wid a hick'ry. You see it was de big kwarterly meetin' which de Sunday atter dinner sarvice wuz fur de darkies, an' brer Sandy Kindall, he preecht. Ole missus sent de boys to church wid me and told 'em to set close by me so I mout make 'em behave deysels. Dey wuz on de bench afore me and laft so much dat I lent over and told 'em I bound to tell der gran'ma. Dreckly brer Sandy sez: 'Lets pray,' and den he sez, sezee: 'Brer Ben you lead us in praar!' I turns round an' kneels down, wich put de boys behins't me and atter a while when

I wuz sorter het up and prayin' pow'ful loud, dat George, he reecht under de bench and stuck a pin about a inch into me. I reckons de folks all think't de debil had snatcht at me, fur I give a whoop an' jumpt clean over de bench ,spang onto de back ov brer Henry Oneil."

Uncle Ben little dreamed when listening to the boisterous laughter which greeted his narrative how familiar his three hearers were with the church incident, or how vividly one of them could recall the "lathering" referred to.

"But that was not the only annoyance you suffered from those boys?" was asked when the merriment had subsided.

"Well, it wasn't; dey used to play ghost an' most skeer de life out'en my old ooman, dar," pointing to a smiling old negress who had come to the door during the conversation. "Dey flinged rocks down de chimbly, hided my axe, tooked off my gate and hanged it up in a tree, stealed fish off my hook I sot in de creek, an' fasten on a black snake instid'st; den jes as John shot his gun George hit me in de back wid a little rock, an' make me think a bullet hit me. An' when I holler an' fell down an' pray, skeered I wuz killed, dem boys jes whoop, and most die a laffin—dats de way dey used for to do."

This account had proceeded amidst outbursts of laughter, as we exchanged glances around at each prank recited.

"You aint told," put in the old woman "'bout how dey tied your ambriller to de calf's tail an den how dey open it wide an turned de calf loose, right dar in de big road, whilst dey felled against de fence and telled you de calf done stealed your ambriller."

This recollection set the old couple chuckling, while their auditors, almost convulsed, simultaneously looked toward a panel of the fence inclosing a cotton field just across the road.

"I am sure you must dislike those mean boys, and have no wish to ever see them again," was said by one of us.

"Me not like dem boys, massa? you's wrong dar. W'y de Lord bress 'um— I'd walk twenty miles, ole as I is, an' Judy would too, jes' to see ary one ov 'em. Dey wusn't mean, boss—jes mischievous like. Atter dey wuz dun debblin us dey would fetch me terbacker, an' de ole ooman a dress or a head hankercher, an' give me der hats an' close what dey wuz tired uv; an' I boun' if dey lived here now, de ole niggahs wudn't neber be cole nor hungry nuther. I sez to Judy tother day, 'Judy,' sez I, 'if we jes knowed how to write a letter to Mars John or Mars George or Mars Will, I boun' dey would sen' us suthin;' I sed dat, an' I knows dey would too."

"But may they not have lost interest in you? It must have been a long time since they moved from here"—thus our spokesman.

"Dats so, boss—its nigh on to seventeen year sens dat time. Maybe Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy done pass outen der minds. We's nuffin but two ole niggahs w'at wuz cotton headed 'fore freedom comed. But we worked right on fur ole missus a year atter de war wuz ended, 'till she died an de boys wuz moved away to de Norf to school. Well, massas, if dey's furgitted de ole niggahs de ole niggahs aint furgitted dem. It seems like no more'n yesterday sens I used to plait whips fur 'em an' make 'em slings an' bird traps, an' tell 'em ole time tales 'bout de compersations ov possums, rabbits an' udder beeses in de times when animals used to talk. Many's de ash cake de ole ooman cooked fur 'em when dey wuz hungry 'tween meals. We nussed dem boys an' we nussed der pa afore 'em. He got kilt in de war when John wasn't but fourteen year old. We aint neber had no more good time sens Mars William wuz dead."

"Have you not been better off since free than when in slavery?"

"Dat we aint! We done got too ole, boss, when freedom comed. It do good, maybe, to young niggahs wat some

a'count in de fields an' childuns w'at can go to school an' git edicated like white folks; but me an' Judy wuz done wored out so nobody want our stiff ole bones round wid der achin an' rheumatiz; freedom aint helped no ole niggahs."

"Do you own the cabin, Uncle Ben?" was asked.

"Lor', boss! no sah,—how I gwine own it? I aint got nuffin 'sides de tools I mend shoes wid, but dem yonder chickens an' dat yaller dog. De place is Judge Swanson's and I aint pay him no rent in so long I look all de time fur him to tell us to git out; den I reckuns we freezes to death, onless de good Lord takes care ov us."

The old couple were evidently living in fear of being turned out of the hut, half tumbled down, which they had occupied for probably forty years; though what with rents in the roof and gaps between the logs they might have been domiciled beneath the branches of a forest oak with seeming equal comfort. The little garden at the side of the hut and the gourd vines running up at its walls looked as when we last saw the place, sixteen years before, only that the garden appeared to have contracted and the gourds to be smaller. The cabin had decayed and shriveled like an old shoe, long out in sun and rain, and but for numerous props would long since have tumbled to the ground. Such was the abode of these kind old friends of our boyhood, and the most faithful servants of our father's mother, who after the loss of our own mother had taken her place, and with whom we three brothers had continued to live after the death of our father, until she also was laid to rest.

"We know where the Lockhart boys are, Uncle Ben; tell me what to say and I'll write a letter to them for you."

"Thankee sir, boss!"

George drew a memorandum from his pocket, turned sideways in the saddle, making a book rest of a knee. "Go on now," he said.

"Yes sah; tell 'em all howdye fur me."

"That's good; and I have it down; go on."

"Tell 'em me and Judy is well and doin' well."

"Oh, you are, are you? But that isn't what you've been telling us."

"No, boss, but I thought dat wuz de way folks starts letters."

"Sure enough, I forgot that; well, go on."

"De white man w'ats writ'en dis, say maybe you all furgit us. Us is Uncle Ben an' Aunt Judy, w'at used to nuss you, an' de same w'at kotched possums an' made simmon beer fur you, an' wich George and Will stayed in de woods wid, when de Yankee sojers rid fru de country. We done growed mighty ole, an' sen's our respecks an' hopes you is well. If you'se married, we hopes your families is well, too. If you'se got some old close w'at you don't want, de same is mighty needin', an' we aint got no home. Mos' all de ole 'quaintances done gone somewhar an' left us, an' old Nero, de bes' 'possum dog, done dead, an' I got 'nuther yaller dog named 'Seez.' We hopes you'se happy an' livin' fur de Lord. Dat's all, Massa."

"All right, the boys shall have the letter," said George, returning the note book to his pocket.

"Do you think," he continued, "that you would know them should you see them?"

"Lor' bress you, massa, I know 'em time I sot eyes on 'em. I got picturs ov all three, w'at dey guv us 'fore dey moved away."

"Please let us look at them?"

The old aunty turned into the cabin and presently hobbled to the door again with three old fashioned ambrotype cases.

"Dat one wid de uniform on," explained the old man, "is Mars John; he fit in de Alabamy Melishy, jes one month 'fore de war ended. Dis here is Mars George wat look so inner-

cent like he neber play no trick on de ole niggahs in his life; and dis is Mars Will de younges' wid his pinter dog Dot twix his knees. Yes, sah, boss, I'd know dem boys if I met 'em in Californy," he affirmed stoutly.

Evidently we were held in the old man's memory as we appeared when those likenesses were made. His imagination had never dwelt on the inevitable changes in stature and face the years between youth and settled manhood bring to each of us. Since the pictures had grown no larger, nor changed in features nor expression, neither had it occurred to his mind that their originals might appear so different now, that even the eye of motherly affection would fail to recognize in either a son. And there are heart pictures preserved by every one which would be the dearer to us if, like this simple old man, we could contemplate no alteration in the prototype; if we might be assured even, that the original had died before clouding the canvas with reflection of bearded sin.

The sight of these old pictures accompanied by Uncle Ben's explanation added to the enjoyment of our call at his gate. They were a surprise, since, even if we had remembered them, we would have supposed them long since lost or destroyed, as every other one made in our boyhood had been. After they had changed hands and been remarked upon and laughed at, George proposed that Uncle Ben should let us have them, but to that the old man would not agree.

"We will pay you for them," said George, "a dollar a piece."

"No, sah, boss. I not sell dem picturs," he replied.

"Well, say five dollars each—fifteen dollars for the three," and a small roll of money was opened before the old man's eyes. He looked at the tempting bank notes for an instant, and then turned his glances on the old woman.

"Fetch dem picturs back heer, Ben; you don't gwine to sell 'em fur no money," Aunt Judy commanded.

"Dat's wat I sez too, boss," and he extended his hands for

the pictures. "We'se looked at 'em, an' talked 'bout our boys ebry day dese sixteen years, an' can't give 'em up now; no sah—hand 'em back."

No wonder that George's eyes were moist as he returned the cases to the old man's hands. Who could fail of emotion over manifestations of such tender remembrance—such disinterested affection. For my own part, I felt like tumbling from my horse, seizing Uncle Ben by the hand and confessing who we were. I think George observed my impulse, for he reined his horse in front of mine, repeated his promise that the boys should receive Uncle Ben's letter, and proposed that we ride on.

CHAPTER II.

INTRODUCTORY AND EXPLANATORY.

To such as have not already traced, between the lines, our design in not making ourselves known to our old colored friends, a brief explanation is in place. This with a word or two of self-introduction and then a word or two more in a moralizing strain will bring us all together in an amiable mood for joining in other visits to the old log cabin.

Let me introduce my eldest brother, John Lockhart; age thirty-four, occupation, merchandising; circumstances, comfortable; for he is now a full partner in a wholesale house in which, fourteen years ago, he was an under clerk. At business a hard worker and on his dignity, he yet likes a romp now and then, and when on one is a very imp of fun.

Reverend———! Well, if you had known George ten years ago, you would sympathize with the pause after writing that title, for of all the unsanctified sons of Adam, he was surely first rowdy.

A frolic and a fight were convertible terms in his vocabulary, with his rollicking spirits, utter fearlessness and remarkable strength. He was never a quarreler, and I think never struck any one on his own account, but he was the leader of one of the two factions at college and trouble was in store for him of the other side, who, in any sense, hit one of his followers below the belt. The singular openness of his daring and mischief must have palliated his offenses in the eyes of the faculty, for nothing else could have secured for him their forbearance. But notwithstanding his many escapades, entailing at times much fatigue and loss of sleep, he somehow managed to keep well abreast his class, and graduated with honors. Judge of the popular astonishment, when, six months after leaving college, this irrepressible joined the Methodist Church, and again, when a few months later he entered the ministry. But his profession has never quelled his propensity for mischief. I have seen it crop out in the pulpit itself; and away from the sacred desk, while a sincere Christian, he is the most unclerical of clergymen. He is often known to take recreation for an hour, from the work of preparing a sermon, by playing his violin.

John and George are benedicks, but I have not to that extent admitted any rival in my devotion to that jealous mistress, the Law. We reside in the same city, and the Wednesdays that do not witness the Lockhart brothers around the dinner table at the parsonage are exceedingly rare. Our weekly dinner party on the 6th of September, 1883, was to decide where we brothers should spend a three weeks' vacation which had been determined on. A letter I had received that day from a lady cousin who had been visiting in Alabama, near our old homestead, was read aloud by John's better half, to whom I had handed it. Among other items therein interesting to us was the following:

"I have made inquiry, as you suggested concerning old

Uncle Ben. He and Aunt Judy are still living and in the identical cabin as when you left them. I am told they are feeble and destitute, but faithful in affectionate recollection of 'our boys,' as they still call you, John and George."

"Poor old friends," said John in a compassionate way. "I propose that we send them——"

"Hold, John!" George interrupted with an impulsive gesture: "that letter nominates our sporting ground. We will go to Alabama and give Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy a surprise party; what say you?"

"Capital, capital!" was John's response, which was echoed by me, and approved by the two wives of the conference.

The following Saturday we were speeding southward, and on Tuesday, at noon, stopped at Eufaula, Ala., where, leaving our trunks, we hired saddle horses and rode twenty miles westward, where, late in the afternoon, we came upon the old cabin with its little garden, its gourd vines and the humble old couple occupying it.

Of our former white neighbors we had ascertained that Judge Robert Swanson was the only one still residing in the vicinity, so to his home we were heading via Uncle Ben's. Half the time of our ride we were discussing what to do for the old darkies, and the manner of doing it, but finally rested all plans upon circumstances after our arrival, and only adopted two resolves: one, that we would not immediately disclose our identity to them (we were sure they could not recognize us,) and the other, that George should do the talking on our meeting the old servants.

Leaving Uncle Ben we rode on to Judge Swanson's with feelings—as the reader must appreciate after the conversation recited—of gratitude for the faithful remembrance and affection in which we found we were held, as was touchingly illustrated in the refusal, even for money, to part with the

old pictures of the boyish faces by which they fancied they might recognize us, even now.

I know of no affection entirely similar to that between the old servant of the Slave Era, and the children of the former master; I know of no attachment more disinterested or more genuinely reciprocal. Scarcely less than the pride our parents felt in the persons of their children, was that of the good natured colored dependants. In their eyes, no other youngsters were half so smart, so comely, or so well bred. In turn, next to the approval of father and mother, the praises of black "aunts" and "uncles" were the proudest encomiums we could receive.

The first pair of boots I ever wore are red of tops in my memory yet, chiefly from the congratulations of dusky aunts and uncles upon this attainment in the direction of manhood. Did I catch a splinter in a finger or stump a toe, or in falling jam my nose, or get stung by busy bee or nimble wasp—who more sympathetic or prompt with soothing appliances than an Aunt Judy? Did I lose ball or whip, an Uncle Ben was ready with knife and leather thongs to replace it. I remember once, when having stolen off against a positive interdiction of a boyish enjoyment—a swim in a treacherous pond—an Uncle Ben was sent in quest of me, with remarks indicating that when I returned, I would meet a flogging. I remember how, when we were moving homeward through the woods, he considerately removed my jacket and introduced under it a padding of green leaves, over which the switch fell with less hurt than the chastiser supposed; and how, an hour later, my sable samaritan took out the padding, the while we laughed in both sleeves of the jacket at the way we "got ahead of ole missus." I remember too, when practicing for my first declamation at the country school, leading an Uncle Ben about sundown quite a distance into the woods,

when, after he had assisted me on to a stump, I belabored the circumambient air with:

"You'd scarce expect one of my age,
To speak in public on the stage,"

And how my one auditor applauded and made me, all willingly, and indeed proudly, repeat the oration at least three times, when he declared that "a little more an' I would beat Mr. Pool (the village parson) a preachin';" with which tribute to my declamatory prowess I walked home at his side, much more self-confident than when on the following afternoon I broke down before thirty girls on the third line of the same recitation.

The eventuations of the emancipation of slavery separated thousands of other youths from old servants just as occurred to us, but there is not one such, wherever met, who will fail to appreciate the desire which had long possessed us for meeting Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy, or the pleasure we realized from now having it in our power to, in a substantial way, reward their devotion to our memory during so long a separation. But our designs in that direction being of George's suggestion, we must needs defer to him in their execution. And now when we have only left the old darkies and when George's eyes are yet moist from that—to us—touching interview, his lurking penchant for mischief is in the ascendant and he breaks out:

"Thinks he would recognize us, does he? Well, he shall at least have some strong reminders of us as we were when those caricatures were made."

"What do you mean to do?" John inquired in an expostulating tone.

"Mean to do? I'm going to have some of the old time sport. I tell you, boys, I have never had so merry an hour as that when I tied the umbrella to the old man's calf."

"You are not going to torment those good old creatures?" I said stoutly; "at least you'll have no aid from me in so doing."

"Yes I will, too," he retorted; "we'll make it up to them afterward and leave them the happier for it all. I'll join you in any contribution for their comfort as long as they live, but, bless their old souls, their boys shall have one more season of fun at their innocent expense before they go to join the angels."

I fear my ministerial brother will never typically wear the cloth, and the reader will share my apprehension after further reading of my narrative.

CHAPTER III.

THE SOUTHERN HOUSEMAID AND BELLE.

Contemporaneous with the political revolution in Southern State affairs precipitated by the emancipation and enfranchisement of the slaves, came disorder into the kitchen of the Southern home. Hannah the cook and Jule the house girl, upon receipt of the news of their freedom, were "taken with a leaving," and their successors to this day have seldom been satisfactory servants. The evil of slavery was to none more apparent than to the matron with two or three belles-of-society daughters who having had maids for every service, found them, like herself, in 1865 unpracticed in and averting from the performance of domestic work.

That the education of Southern girls had been misdirected, incomplete and devoid of practical character was one of the revelations of the abolition of slavery. Recognizing this fact all the more plainly after years of residence North, where girls are, as a rule, reared for something more

than mere ornaments, we were curious to note what change, if any, had come into the training of Southern girls.

Our welcome at Judge Swanson's was as cordial as absentees for so long a time from childhood's scenes and associations could have desired. We readily recognized him and his good lady, though our faces did not recall us to them. But there were two members of his family whom I would not have known. What was there in the recollection of Willie and Daisy, two chubby baby girls of three and five, sixteen years ago, to suggest the superb young women who, soon after we were seated on the colonnade, with sundown hats swinging from their arms, walked leisurely up the shaded lane? Before they had entered the gate I had mentally remarked upon the graceful arrangement of their waving brown hair. I fully appreciate how incredible the statement will appear (I almost feel the need of appending the affidavits of every one present, to assure its credence), but it is nevertheless true that here were two young ladies, otherwise *comme il faut*, with foreheads. I would even go further and aver that not only did they not wear bangs, but no shop hair whatever, but such an averment might, in the reader's mind, throw discredit on other statements in my story. Before they had reached the steps I pronounced them witchingly handsome. But who could they be? Our host solved the question, introducing them as his daughters, Misses Daisy and Willie. While John and George were shaking their little hands almost off (its astonishing how presumptuous married men are on such occasions), I was recalling the pink little toes, bare ankles and lisping talk of two little children as I had last seen them; how fond both were of candy; the headless doll little Willie carried in her arms and the crop-eared kitten Daisy caressed. But now I am shaking a hand of each, and looking first one and then the other in the face and fancying that I must have admired these

chubby children aforesaid more than I had heretofore realized. And if I had never so appreciated their positions previously, I now thought the aforementioned pets to have been blessed, and half wished, provided their owners' tastes had undergone no change, that I were now either the headless doll or the crop-eared kitten—or both at the same time. When, after they had left us perhaps an hour (though the time appeared several hours to me) we were called in to supper, another remarkable phenomenon greeted my eyes. In a Southern home, in a thoroughly genteel family of comfortable income, here was a daughter, a college graduate, in a jaunty apron and with tray in hand, waiting on the table. I expected an explanation to the effect that the house girl had run away that afternoon or the cook gone off without giving notice; but the only apology I received was in the form of a smile from the fair serving maid which said, if ever smile said anything, "No, this is nothing unusual—I am accustomed to it—it is one of my accomplishments;" and the look I gave in return was intended to say, "It is a charming accomplishment—it becomes you—and from this moment, my one aspiration in life is to become the successor to the headless doll."

After supper I was more interested in the sounds from the dining room of clinking dishes than in the conversation between the Judge, John and George; unless I except that part of it in which our host mentioned that his wife and daughters had refused since the return of the girls from school to allow him to employ a cook or house girl, preferring to do the domestic work with their own hands, which they did, from the cooking to the making of their silk dresses. But at length I was in the parlor, and as a becoming courtesy, asked the ladies for music, though self-assured—with impressions of Kellogg and Cary and Nilsson and Patti, and the first violin and piano virtuosos—that now, at

least, I should be bored. I think they anticipated my estimate of them in the musical art (or, worse still, may have measured my taste as I had their attainments), and sang two or three melodies. But now as I am recalling to Willie some ballad I once loved well, but had not heard since leaving the old home, Daisy has given her fingers to Strauss, and the Viennese composer would have thrilled at their soulful touch. Without a pause of regret at leaving the waltz, her hands are transferred to Hungarian Liszt for a galop, spirited of composition and transporting in execution, out of which she gambols into an elfish roulade and thence glides into one of Haydn's adagios, lulling the excitation her spirituosos had aroused. Again they revert to song; and solos and duets from Il Trovatore, Martha and Pinafore, The Chimes, La Mascot and the Pirates are given with more than professional grace and with all the excellence of cultivated art. What with their fine foreheads, home-grown tresses, conversational charms, domestic virtues, musical accomplishments and personal completeness, I was supremely indifferent to the plottings going on behind cigars in the sitting-room against Uncle Ben. I was in love, and but for one annoyance would have been temporarily happy —but the latter was impossible while the question of crop-eared kitten or headless doll was confounding me.

Had either of the sisters gone from the parlor for thirty minutes I should have proposed to the remaining one. I wished one or the other would go to the sitting-room, but could not have named which I should have preferred remain. Such was my dilemma when, the evening waned, we were summoned to the sitting-room, where, at Mrs. Swanson's request, Daisy went to the organ and sang "Home Again," in which all voices were joined. The song ended, George thanked Heaven in such a prayer as must have

stirred every heart with emotion, for our being so privileged—

"To meet our friends once more."

Afterward I spent a half-hour in George's room, listening to the plans arranged for first tantalizing and then benefiting the old servants.

CHAPTER IV.

"DARS A HEAP OF TRUBBLE ON DE OLE MAN'S MIND."

Judge Swanson entered heartily into our conspiracy. The absence of servants from the house rendered us safe from recognition in the community, the ladies being enjoined from mentioning our names to any one. The succeeding day, Thursday, was spent in revisiting the old homestead and in hunting over the fields and woods familiar to our feet in bygone times.

On returning to the house at evening, Judge Swanson introduced to our service a small black harlequin, looking shrewdly and stepping nimbly, under the name of "Mart," whom we secured as our "Artful Dodger" by payment down of a small fee, which was to be liberally supplemented on the condition of expert operations.

About nine o'clock Mart returned from his first expedition with Uncle Ben's yellow dog in tow, to which an out-house was assigned with ample provisions for contenting him with his prison estate, thus preventing howling announcements of his whereabouts. An hour later Mart evidenced deftness in the art of robbing hens' roosts without awaking the sleeping owners—a feat which the average Southern darkey is reputed to excel in. Mart's modus operandi was unique. He insinuated a slender pole beneath the sleeping fowl, which

at once shifted its footing on to the stealing stick, and thus was unsuspectingly transferred to a small coop, the door of which was opened and closed by the Rev. George Lockhart. One by one Aunt Judy's feathered treasures, nine in number, were abducted and conveyed to a lock-up in Judge Swanson's yard, while she and Uncle Ben were sleeping. Our host, being a magistrate of the district, anticipated an early call from the old man the following morning. We walked out upon the colonnade, where the Judge was standing as Uncle Ben reached the gate.

"Well, Uncle Ben," the Judge addressed him, "what brings you up so early—come to pay some rent?"

"Eh, Lordy, Judge—I'se in a heap er truble dis mornin'; somebody done stole my dog an' all my chickens," he answered dejectedly.

"Indeed! that is too bad; what time in the night were they stolen?"

"I dunno, sah; dey was all dar when I went ter sleep an' all goned when I woked up; I'se ruinted now, Judge."

"Do you suspect any one?"

"No, sah, I don't expect nobody."

"How much were they worth, Uncle Ben?" George questioned.

"I been offered sebenty-five cents for my dog, an' de chickens wuz wuth twenty cents apiece anywhar."

"What do you propose doing about it?" George asked.

"I comed fur to ax de Judge to ketch de rogue an' git back my dog an' chickens."

"Do you think Judge Swanson knows who stole them?"

"No, sah, but I think he mout offer a 'ward ter folks what would ketch 'em."

By the owner's valuation the missing property was worth two dollars and fifty-five cents.

The magistrate promised to take the affair in hand, but

cautioned the old man against mentioning the theft to any person. "You and your wife keep mum," he advised, "and we may overtake the rogue."

"Thus reassured, he lifted his hat, bade us a cheerful "good mornin', bosses," and was walking off when the Judge called him :

"Uncle Ben, I must have some rent money—cannot wait longer on you—you must pay me at least twelve or fifteen dollars in a day or two."

The old man's countenance fell.

"Have you not something you can sell to raise that much for me?" added the Judge.

"He has pictures of the three Lockhart boys, for which we offered him fifteen dollars," said George.

"Boss, I wish you hadn't tole dat. De Judge 'll say I'se mighty mean not ter took dat money an' pay it to him. But I can't sell dem picturs."

"Perhaps he will change his mind and sell them, so I would wait on him a day or two longer," George addressed Judge Swanson.

"Maybe I has to do it—maybe I has to—but, Judge, Judy'll have de haystacks (hysterics) whensoever dem picturs is gwine away," said the old man as he departed.

In the afternoon we walked down to the cabin, George carrying a boot, on which he directed a repair made, to be ready by morning. Aunt Judy was disconsolate over the loss of her hens, which (the blessings brightening with their flight) she declared the best layers in the settlement. Shortly after nightfall Mart repaired to the old couple to inform them that on the previous night he had seen a man in the road leading their dog and carrying a coop of chickens.

"Why didn't you stop him?" demanded Uncle Ben.

"Didn't you sell 'em?" queried Mart.

"No ; dey was stoled! Leastwise," he added, mindful of

the Judge's injunction of reticence, "leastwise the man didn't pay fur 'em."

"What was the man's name?" Mart asked.

"He neber told me."

"What did you ask him for the dog and chickens?"

"He took 'em away afore I telled 'im de price."

"What time was he here?"

"I reckon about midnight."

"Well, I saw them gwine off 'fore ten o'clock; now, was the man whàt took 'em away white or black?"

In seeking to cover his slip in admitting the theft by pretending a sale, Uncle Ben had fallen a victim to Mart's shrewd questioning. But he evaded further entangling examination by a manner of speech common to elderly darkies when addressing the younger of their race.

"Look a here, Mart," he said, "you stop gwine about axin' folks questions whar you'se got no business to. If you seed de man wid my dog an' yer Aunt Judy's hens, you knows as well as me whedder he was white or black, so no need to ax me 'bout dat. When I wuz your age I had more manners dan to be axin' ole folks 'bout der business. You young niggahs, since freedom comed, done got too uppity—so you is."

But Mart was profiting too much by the confusion into which he had thrown the moralist to take offense at his rebuke. Seated on the cobbler's bench, which was against a wall, he had removed every tool, with the boot Uncle Ben had mended, opposite an opening between two logs with only a board covering it from the outside. Mart was affected, besides, with a pious turn of mind on this evening, and volunteering a flattering remark upon Uncle Ben's eloquence at prayer, offered to remain until that nightly exercise of the cabin was over. This mollified the old man,

who, as Mart shifted his sitting from the bench to a stool beneath a corner shelf, began singing his favorite hymn :

" De storms may howl an' de win's may blow,
Trubbul all aroun'.
Dey cannot drove me frum de shore,
Trubbul all aroun'.

" De debil may stole my silver an' gole,
Trubbul all aroun'.
But he can't steal de 'ligion outen my soul,
Trubbul all aroun'.

" Ole Satan he's a-sneakin' about in de night,
Trubbul all aroun'.
You'd better keep de door of yer heart shut tight,
Trubbul all aroun'."

The song ended, Uncle Ben's eyes were closed in his zeal of prayer, and Aunt Judy's face buried in the chair, when Mart stealthily rose, standing, and raising the lid of an old cigar box on the shelf, took therefrom the three pictures, and having pocketed them resumed a kneeling posture, which he was careful to retain until Uncle Ben had turned after his amen and observed him. When the old people were supposed to be asleep, Mart returned to the cabin, displaced the board covering the crevice at the bench and, inserting a hand through the opening, abstracted the boot, and then, one by one, all the tools. As Mart finished readjusting the board Aunt Judy was heard to call out, " Ben, 'pears to me I heard a rat gnawin' sunthin'."

" What's here for a rat to gnaw? Go to sleep," he answered her.

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE BEN TURNS PUGILIST.

Trilling and twittering and tweedling; purling and chirruping; caroling and quavering; whistling and piping and shaking and warbling—tunefully, gladfully, gleefully, a dozen mocking-birds were singing a morning serenade to us as the Judge's younger daughter and I, her sister and John, George and their father walked by couples, just as the sun was rising, down the road at the side of which was the cabin. "Sweet the song of birds," wrote Byron, but I doubt if the impassioned bard ever listened to bird song so inspiring of his utterance as one may hear any dewy morn in Southern woodland.

Jingling several silver pieces in his hand, George greeted the dusky cobbler, as he appeared at his door, with a bravura "good morning," and then—

"I've called for my boot, Uncle Ben, and if you've done a good job shall pay you handsomely."

"Massa, massa!" exclaimed the old man with deprecatory gestures, "de debil am shorely broked loose! Your boot an' ebry one of my tools is stoled," and tears started from his eyes.

"What! You've been robbed again?"

"Yes, sah, an' my door wuz barred fast; nobody aint broke in de house nor comed down de chimbly; but dem things am gone."

"That looks as if some one inside the house had moved them," said George, and then turning to the Judge, asked in an undertone, but loud enough for Uncle Ben to hear, "is this old man honest?"

"I have always thought him honest," was answered in like tone.

"Massa—Judge—I hope you don't b'lieve I stoled dat boot. Fore de Lord I dunno whar 'tis," pleaded Uncle Ben.

"I haven't heard of his being in so much trouble since the Lockhart boys used to annoy him," said Judge Swanson.

"No, sah, an' dem boys neber guv me dis much trouble in all der lifes—dat dey didn't."

"I must have my boot or money to buy another," said George. "Sell me those pictures, Uncle Ben! You'd rather do that than go to jail, had you not?"

"Yes—Lord!" exclaimed Aunt Judy, as she started from the door where she had been standing.

"This cruelty should stop," I whispered George; "it is simply diabolical."

"Ben, Ben!" came from Aunt Judy, as with uplifted hands she hobbled into the doorway again; "de picturs of our boys is gone, too!"

The old man dropped down upon the door-sill and sat with open mouth and staring eyes, the most grotesque image of confoundment and black despair imaginable. Despite the sympathy I, in common with the young ladies, had felt, it was not possible to repress laughter as we contemplated his face. But suddenly he arose as if vitalized by the energy of youth.

"I know now what's de matter," he exclaimed; "dis house is ha'nted. Dese ain't yethly goin's on; sperits is stole dat boot an' likewise dem picturs, dem chickens an' my dog. Take us to de jail-house, massa, if you wants to, but I don't stay in dis one nary 'nuther night, long as I'se lived dar." Saying which he stepped before us with an air which said: "Lead on—I'm ready to follow, and no questions asked."

"All right," said Judge Swanson, "leave everything in the house for the rent you owe me; shut the door, and you and Judy follow us." Three minutes later we were returning toward Judge Swanson's residence, the old couple sadly traipsing in the wake of our party. At the gate the Judge called for Mart, ordered him to take Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy in charge and escort them to his (Mart's) own cabin, two miles back on the plantation, where he should keep them under guard, allowing them to hold conversation with no person until he should call and give permission.

Without an unsubmissive word they went away with their impish guide and guard. Scarcely were they out of sight, by a foot-path across a cotton field, when two wagons loaded with lumber were driven down the road from the direction of a saw-mill near by, and with them a number of men with carpentry tools. Breakfast over, our host returned with us to Uncle Ben's late home to find the old cabin razed to the ground and a dozen workmen, under the direction of an active foreman, busily sawing out and mortising framing timbers.

By noon the skeléton of a two-room house was upreared, and the wagons had deposited material requisite for its completion. Followed by one of the wagons, John drove away after dinner for Eufaula, whence he returned about three o'clock the following (Saturday) afternoon, with a substantial bedstead and ample bedding, chairs, a table and needful crockery, an outfit of cooking utensils and a comfortable store of supplies of meat, meal, flour, sugar, coffee and molasses. A complete suit of clothing, including hat and shoes for Uncle Ben and dress-goods for Aunt Judy, filled a trunk. A more complete set of cobbler's tools than our old friend had ever owned was supplemented by a small stock of leather for use in his repair work. For a nominal sum the Judge had executed in favor of the old

man a lease on the half-acre of ground so long as he or his wife should live. Before sunset the house was in order for occupancy, and George held the key to the locked door.

Mrs. Swanson and the young ladies became members of our surprise party and went with us after supper to the cottage, while the Judge accompanied a wagon which was to bring Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy home. We had a fire kindled, a lamp lighted, the three old pictures on the mantel, the old tools and the new and the mysteriously missing boot on the cobbler's bench; Aunt Judy's chickens in a new roost and the dog tied near the door before the wagon came, when we took up position in the other room, which was empty, to observe through the glass upper half of the door and overhear. What with the darkness, their dim sight and the new fence, they did not recognize the place where they alighted from the wagon; the light and the new cottage were unfamiliar. Uncle Ben recognized his dog at the steps, but the Judge gave him no time to express his surprise before urging him within, after Aunt Judy, when with the remark, "This is your jail, and you will never leave it," he shut the door on them.

* * * * * * *

"Didn't he say dis wuz de jail?" queried Aunt Judy, as after a dazed stare about the room she turned it on Uncle Ben.

"Dat's what he said, but——'

The livest ghost the prisoner could have conjured up as raiding the old cabin could never have evoked a more amazed countenance than the sight of his bench, his tools and the boot had brought to Uncle Ben.

In the same instant Aunt Judy's eyes had turned to the mantel. "Lord hab mussy on us!" she ejaculated.

"Dat's 'zactly what I sez," responded Uncle Ben, as he took the boot in hand.

"De jail folks stole 'em," she said, moving nearer to the mantel.

"It habs dat appearment," he responded, as he began examining the lost tools.

"I don't understan' all dis heer, Ben ; de jail-house is way down to Clayton, an' de wagon ain't druv us no twenty mile."

"Hit's mighty curus, Judy—dat's a fack. I neber see dis house afore, but dar's Seez at de door, an' dese am my tools, an' dis am dat gen'leman's boot what 'lowed we had to go to jail an' what wrote dat letter to our boys."

"I neber 'spected ter see our boys, but here dey is."

At this announcement Uncle Ben turned and saw the pictures on the mantel. As he shuffled toward them, we entered from the other room. At the sight and sound of our entrance the old couple stood mute from astonishment for a moment, until Uncle Ben thought of the boot, when he made haste to restore it to its owner.

"So you have decided to give it up, have you?" George asked, in a surly way, "and you pretended those pictures were stolen," he added, pointing to the mantel.

While George was thus twitting the old man, Mrs. Swanson had approached and was whispering to Aunt Judy.

"Massa, as de Lord sees me, I ain't see none er dese things sens Thursday night till jes' now, an' I don't know how dey comes ter be here no more den I knows whar I iz."

At this juncture of affairs Aunt Judy demonstrated the possession of pretty full use of lungs and limbs for, bounding towards George with a loud cry of "bress de Lord!" she pinioned him with her arms.

"Dar now!" exclaimed Uncle Ben, "de ole ooman's got de haystacks, sure nuff."

"I got no haystacks, Ben, but I got our boys," the old

woman cried, as she loosed her hold on George and seized John instead.

"And I am Will, Uncle Ben," I said, grasping a hand of the old man.

There never was seen such a look of astonishment as Uncle Ben's for the space of several seconds, at the conclusion of which the old man himself was a victim of "haystacks" of laughter, noticing which, George started toward him, when he as suddenly underwent another transformation; for, springing forward, he caught George by the left arm, while, with his right hand he began pounding him most religiously.

"You owdashus rascal!" he exclaimed, as he planted a well-directed fist on a shoulder. "You've been up to more debilment, is you?" (Whack! whack!) "Tormentin yer Uncle Ben agin, is you? ha, ha!" (Whack! whack!) "Stealin' from Uncle Ben and den puttin' 'im in jail, eh? ha, ha!" (Whack!) "Ha, ha!" (Whack! whack!)

"Take—him—off!" called out George between his gasps of laughter, as he tried to dodge the blows.

"Give it to him, Uncle Ben," I responded, "he is the one who did it all."

"I'm gwine to," (whack! whack!) "'Course he's de one," (Whack!) "Here's one fur de letter you writ, (whack!) and one fur dat boot bisness (whack!) an' three wuth five dollar a piece fur dem pictures. (Whack! whack! whack!) Now, sah, you take dat, ha, ha, ha!" and, completely exhausted from his unresisted efforts, he sank into a chair to resume laughing and rubbing his overflowing eyes with his left sleeve, while shaking John's right hand. Such merriment amidst tears! Such a mingling of soft sobs with hearty laughter! Judge Swanson had entered, and Mart's face was grinning and wet with tears just within the door.

Wrinkled and black old faces, faces of strong men, and faces of matrons and fair girls all tearfully evidencing that

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

* * * * * * *

Judge Swanson related to Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy the provision "their boys" had made, providing them with comforts for life. Mrs. Swanson revealed to Aunt Judy the supplies for their use and the dresses for her wear, which Misses Daisy and Willie volunteered to cut and make for her.

John made it a condition of the presentation of the suit of clothing to Uncle Ben that he should attend church services the following morning in his new attire. As we entered the door we saw Uncle Ben on a rear seat next the aisle. But Uncle Ben's acme of astonishment was reached now when George, who had been invited by the pastor to do so, assumed the sacred desk, and a minute later began lining the opening hymn; for Uncle Ben had not been informed of George's profession. We who were anticipating it enjoyed the open-eyed wonder with which he greeted this remarkable phenomenon of the most unsaintly of his boys in a Methodist pulpit. The opening prayer impressed the hearers that a cordial understanding existed between the man praying and the Great Father prayed to; so spirited, unconstrained and confiding the utterance of invocation, with fervent responses in broken voice, at times, from the rear seat, next the aisle.

And now the sermon: With no cant in tone of voice, nor expression of face, nor gesture; in language simple but expressive and beautiful the preacher paints the beatitudes of brotherly love and human compassion and gracious charity and trusting faith which make up the sum of Christian character. On wings of imagination he transports the congre-

gation to the celestial happiness awaiting the faithful to the end, the humble colored no less than the most highly favored of mankind. Ascending from height to height with his soaring eloquence, the wayward boy of so many years before and the mirthful tease of only the night before, have vanished from Uncle Ben's mind before the earnest apostle of practical yet adorning Christianity. The face of the district preacher, as he hung upon the magic tongue, and bent his gaze upon the glowing countenance of the young minister, realized that one of his cloth might indulge in innocent amusement out of the pulpit and yet be possessed of genuine christianity, and endowed with the power of conviction.

"I always said so," soliloquized Uncle Ben as he walked from the church, but loud enough to be overheard. "I always said so—dat my boys wuzn't bad—jes mischevus like, was all; but shorely dat George was baptized wid hot water."

* * * * * * *

Our stay of a fortnight longer witnessed frequent visits to Uncle Ben and Aunt Judy, and many incidents of our childhood came under entertaining review. We parted from them with heartfelt emotion, and with an understanding that a bureau of correspondence should be maintained. This bureau is now in active operation, Willie Swanson representing one end of it and I the other. John's business engagements will probably prevent him from repeating his visit, but George has promised to accompany and be present with me on a certain occasion, the date of which Willie is to name in her next letter; anxiously awaiting which I invite the reader to join me in singing Uncle Ben's refrain:

"Nobody knows de trubbul I see;
Nobody knows but de Lord an' me.'

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